

**BWL Development***Epically Awesome in Every Way*

|---[ Chapter 14 ]---|

## Fading Hope

by The Wildcat

He should have known all along. The evidence had been building to one undeniable conclusion. Perhaps he had been ignoring the truth rather than accept the possibility.

Radiance smoldered in the heated sands. The late afternoon sun sagged above the western horizon. Fading from blue to orange, the blistering sky began to mimic the century high temperatures of the day. Even the sparse clouds seemed to boil away.

For a few minutes, the vigilante allowed the heat to roll harmlessly over his suit. Internal cooling blocked the kiss of arid winds, but he found certain tranquility in the moment. It was as though the sun had washed away the evil.

Even so, Wildcat knew that a moment's serenity was little more than guise to mask reality. He needed only examine the surveillance recordings that had pointed toward Black Mesa during the night. A battle had raged. The two parties were shrouded by smoke and distance, but the volleys and flares revealed a brutal conflict.

Yet the local media reported nothing. Their only broadcasts remained focused on the downtown rescue efforts. They mentioned casually that two additional buildings had fallen during the night, but they offered no further explanation. Every report was given with feigned indifference.

Sighing heavily, the crime fighter shook the troubles from his head and turned to sit on the ledge of his rooftop perch. The city was awash with activity. Full power had been

restored during the early morning hours. It was a welcome return for the residents. They reported for jobs or aided in the recovery effort.

But a whimsical and unsettling air had settled on the city that morning. With guarded actions, the sensation was obviously felt by all.

For Wildcat, the feeling grew with his visit to the city. Expecting to find a bustling county detention center, he had been shocked to find that the jail was a small building with two police guards and as many inmates. His visit proved fruitless within minutes.

Turning to the city hospital, The Wildcat decided to investigate several rumors regarding a handful of patients held in the secured wing. He was forced to sedate one police officer and one nurse in order to speak with Charles Conrad in private. The man, bearing bandages over his eyes, was edgy. Hearing the mechanical growl of Wildcat's voice, he had refused to cooperate. However, given time and a more friendly voice change, he had been convinced.

Unfortunately, Conrad was a conspiracy theorist. A particularly zealous and unstable sort at that. His information was outlandish and filled with rants about spaceships and UFO crash survivors.

Then another man, a scientist, intervened. He was a timid little man with wire frame glasses and a light beard that rounded out his receding hair line. The man's approach had been nearly silent. He had edged around the door frame and whispered his greetings. His offer to filter the truth from Conrad's statements was met with skepticism, but it was a welcome intersession.

Wildcat had followed the man into a large, but relatively secluded room. It was in that isolated corner of the hospital that he met the survivors. Given the testimonies of the hapless band, the mental picture began to form.

During the early-eighties, the Black Mesa Missile Range had been decommissioned. Secretly though, it had been reestablished as the Black Mesa Research Facility. A handful of thermonuclear weapons and systems were maintained for cost efficiency, but the compound was otherwise a civilian government project.

The development had been initiated as an exploration of new energy sources to combat high fuel prices and the threat of another energy crisis. However, one of the research teams mysteriously developed a new and unrelated technology. Nano-bots.

Applied immediately to basic clean-suits, the nano-bots were only designed for maintenance. Later incarnations of the suit were developed and marketed commercially, boasting electronic shielding and medical systems.

The income of the suits alone allowed for significant expansion of the base. The original research team was promoted quickly and soon other experiments began under their direction.

**“- What are you thinking?”** Ellen’s voice, muffled only by radio distortion, was a startling return to the present.

The Wildcat had asked her to monitor his exploits remotely. It had been a means to placate her concerns, but it also allowed him to remain in constant communication with his base of operations.

Addressing the question, he pondered aloud. *“I don’t think Conrad’s UFO theory is relevant, but I wouldn’t be surprised if it was something similar. Not after last night.”*

**“-You mean those creatures might have been aliens?”**

*“Sort of. I mean, it IS a possibility. But... I also think it could be genetic manipulation. Just look at what they were trying to do to us. And Mister Eldridge. He was scheduled*

*for something called an HSRP manipulation. I recovered a few charts from the mainframe. Enough to know that it would not have been pleasant.*

*“Actually, I’m a little more concerned about those other men. If that Rosenberg was telling the truth, then... I mean... the possibility of opening a link across time and space... even the bonds of our universe itself... It’s extraordinary!”*

Most of the Black Mesa survivors had been noticeably careful with their words. Their attempts to self-censor their testimony had been transparent. However, two of their number had acted as liaisons.

The man with a mellow choral voice related a tale of such daring and unparalleled cunning. Survivalist heroics and dire consequences. The entire story was absurd, but Wildcat could not afford to ignore the man’s words. Some of the details might reveal genuine facts.

After the scientist had completed his tale, the lone security guard had stepped forward. He recounted his own testimony. His account was even farther stretched across reality. Yet, Wildcat had persisted in claiming all of the data for further consideration.

As the sun lowered, the vigilante faced a world of new possibilities and new riddles. He had to consider every detail.

**“-You don’t think they were lying, do you?”**

*“No. Imagine if even a fraction of what they have described really happened and our government’s gotten in over their own heads.”*

**“-My God...”** There was a long pause as Ellen allowed the details to sink in and Wildcat again considered his options.

In the growing shadow of a neighboring skyscraper, the vigilante allowed the data to sift in his mind.

*"Sector C,"* he grunted.

**"-What?"**

*"I need to go to Black Mesa and do some digging for myself. Based on what they said, I need to start at the epicenter of this mess. I need to find the test labs, assuming the facility really is still somewhat intact. Is my car ready?"*

**"-You mean leave us alone with... Mister Eldridge said your machines finished assembling it a few minutes ago."**

Turning away from the glow of sunset, The Wildcat glimpsed a grey cloud puffing up from the eastern horizon. Righteous hunger filled the crime fighter. He strolled to the edge of the rooftop and focused on the smoke. And he knew.

*"I'll be by to pick up the car. Then I need to stop by Chamberlain."*

**"-Good God why!?"** Panic finally slipped through the woman's forced calm.

*"Because, it's under attack."*

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Abandoned.

The Chamberlain Research Institute was but a hallow shell. Assault units had traversed the corridors and passages of the main complex through endless hours.

Finally, Commander had tired. His efforts at Black Mesa had as yet revealed little. He proceeded with caution, fully aware of a familiar but concealed power within the base.

He also dispatched a unit of scouts to track the seeker's progress. He could feel the energy already. The seeker was half full. Though he lay dormant during the day, he would resume his rampage soon. A surplus of power waited.

As dusk settled over the desert, Commander had returned his attention to CRI. Still, he had found nothing. Dark Shadow had been weak. He had wasted his power and fallen victim to some feeble adversary. Without a great charge of dark energy, the guard was virtually invisible.

Commander recalled the data that he had collected that day. As the assault units hurled grenades into the buildings, he reexamined his own conclusions.

In an articulate sequence, windows vomited fire. Outer walls shattered and dusted the courtyard with debris. The machines readied a fresh hail of explosives for the warehouse complex. It was a single thought that halted their attack.

At last, he had seen it. His mistake had been heinous, a colossal waste. The warehouse had been destroyed prior to his attack and the maintenance droid had appeared as the only presence. He had ignored it.

Commander cursed himself for being so foolish. The assault units readied their rifles and pushed into the debris.

The welder droid attacked first. It lunged at one of the machines, scoring its armor plating with the welding torch. Undaunted, the robot batted the droid into the open. Twelve independent streams of jacketed slugs tore the tiny robot apart.

For a moment, Commander was blinded. Weak and barely dangerous, the ball of dark energy had been crammed into the first machine's face plate. It burst in a cloud of fire and shrapnel.

Dark Shadow had visibly changed. His once void skin had become stringy and red. Muscle seemed to entangle the guard as a mummified corpse. He steadied himself for another attack and moved silently toward his opponents.

Sinister and pompous, the sneer could not be seen. Commander was grotesquely pleased. He knew of the meat-like fungus. It was a staple of his home territories from millennia past. It was weak but pesky.

While the guard plunged into the midst of the assault squad, Commander turned his attention to delegating orders. **“-Strike force zero-zero-two. CRI contingency.”**

A weak orb bounced harmlessly off one unit. Another machine snared Dark Shadow with a crippling bear hug restraint. The guard struggled, but within seconds he was gripped firmly by a quartet of metal.

*“...wheee are many...”* the demi-consciousness of the fungus gasped through Dark Shadow's mouth.

**“-I know what you are,”** Commander bellowed. **“-You are thieves.”**

*“...join us... ...you belong to us...”*

A new string of data passed through Commander's mind. He stuttered for a moment and then resumed. **“-Assault Units zero-one-five, zero-one-six. Target, Black Mesa. Objective, Phase Two.”**

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He was an old man. Certainly, his hair was only beginning to gray, but he still felt old. Old and helpless. The man in the mirror seemed to age by the minute.

Truthfully, he was in his late thirties with streaks of gray in his black hair. His auburn skin had become ashy with

blood loss and a lifetime in Black Mesa's laboratories. His eyes were swollen and tired.

His lab coat was tattered and essentially useless. His blood-soaked slacks were clearly unsanitary, but the bandages on his stump were the only dressing available.

Doctor Vance backed his chair, a scrapped together wheel chair, away from the mirror. He had all but convinced himself of the fruitlessness of a push to the surface. It was only the thought of his family that offered encouragement.

He moved toward the picture slowly, allowing the memories to batter his mind. For them, he would survive. Even in the rickety, overhauled office chair he would join the final drive for escape.

He collected the photo and exited the makeshift bedroom. It had once been an office in the outer perimeter of the Lambda Bunker. The tiny office complex had housed a large band of survivors for nearly two weeks.

When the surface expedition returned, the team was in shambles. It had been Lauren that explained the situation. If the Lambda survivors wished to see the surface even once more in their lives, they would need to fight.

Doctor Vance rolled into the main foyer. Scientists and security guards were busily trying to prepare their weapons and satchels of supplies. It was a scene not dissimilar to that which had greeted him on his arrival in Lambda.

He and a handful of civilians had been the last to reach the bunker before the explosion. From that day forward, the survivors had assumed that all hope was lost. It was only the chance arrival of a marine contingent that had given rise to new promise.



The marines were already in the outer courts, scouting the escape route. The civilians needed make haste.

At that moment, as a plague, the clicking began. Its source was an older machine. It clicked and chirped violently. Needles jolted to and fro drawing black lines manically. Sporadic clicks and pops forced a cringe from every observer.

Doctor Vance moved toward the legacy console and peered at its readout as though it might attack. His eyes widened and a forced wince distorted his face. He turned to the suddenly quieted congregation. "This is impossible."

"We've got to get out of here," one balding scientist shrieked.

"Nobody panic," a guard reassured. "Just follow the marines to the surface. Let's go."

Doctor Vance glared at the paper. Something was missing. Some portion of the readout was wrong. "My God... It's coming from somewhere else!"

"We don't have time for this doc."

The scientist nodded and pushed toward the exit. His colleagues were steadily filing through the door frame in a subdued panic. The guards were standing idly beside the entrance with weapons ready.

"Get back in!"

"Move!"

"Withdraw!"

The commotion flooded back as a tidal wave and washed over those still in the foyer. The marines were the last to enter forcing their injured into the arms of the science team.

One young grunt pitched a grenade through the outer passage and then doubled over. His comrades pulled the bloodied corpse inside as his last sacrifice sent a resounding burst through the walls.

“GAD DAMMIT! Who the hell’re these guys?” one smoke coated marine yelped.

“We need to let them help us,” Eli blurted.

“Hell no!”

“Are you crazy Eli!”

Doctor Vance’s voice peeked with anger, “We can’t just sit here! They can help us. Corporal Taylor, please.”

The first of the robots rounded the corner. In the narrow entrance, it stood as a blockade. Bullets spattered and popped off its gleaming armor. It steadied its rifle amidst the deluge of bullets and began spraying the room of potential victims.

Doctor Vance watched helplessly as his colleagues were cut down. But the machine’s massacre was cut short. A solid thunk of impact pitched the machine forward and off balance. It staggered and turned on the new threat revealing a fist sized hole in its back.

Entering the corridor opposite the robots were men clad in the heavy black Kevlar of Black Operations and the gray gas masks of the marines. They were dressed in uniformity, but their equipment seemed to have been salvaged from the base’s victims, a combination of manifold units.

“What the hell?”

“Who the hell are these guys!?”

“Now’s our chance, while they’re distracted.”

One of the marines turned and shook his head. "They're blocking both routes out. We're pinned down between them."

"That's the Lambda Reactor complex, how'd they get in there?"

Eli banged his fist on a metal file cabinet. "We NEED to let them help! Corporal?"

The Corporal turned sharply as though he intended to strike, but he restrained himself. "If you think... fine. Everybody make room. But if they as much as flinch..."

"What about the big one?"

"HELL NO!" one grunt blurted. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to stop those bastards?"

"Shut up Millar! Vance, send your friends to free him. It'll make a good diversion. Everybody get ready to move! And Doctor, we won't be waiting for them. Understand?"

Eli nodded and wheeled toward a barricaded door in the eastern wall of the foyer. As he pried the last brace free, the door creaked open. The storage room beyond was dank and lightless. In the darkness, a series of red eyes waited patiently.

"Weeee... are pleased to be of service."

"You understand the plan already?"

"We understand much."

Without another word, the creatures emerged and began hobbling toward the battle in the outer court. With leathery skin of green and brown hues, the hunched figures were as old and weary men.

The scientist watched them trot blindly into the crisscrossing streaks of screaming metal. Neither the

machines, nor the black suited soldiers hesitated or altered their trajectories.

Splashes of green and yellow ooze burst from each wound. One by one, the creatures fell. Six of them took defensive positions and turned on both the operatives and the machines. Even from the confines of the foyer, Eli could feel the static buildup.

“That’s it,” the Corporal snorted, “Everybody move.”

As the flood of humanity emptied into the passage, Doctor Vance could see the green glow form before the creatures. They strained, as to pull every stray volt into their charge. With the crackle of focused electricity, the green arcs snapped and battered the two enemy forces.

Eli rolled into the passage, among the last to leave. He was disappointed to find the machines withstanding the alien’s attacks. The tunnel to the surface was completely impassable, and the little aliens were dwindling in number.

Then he noticed a hidden agent as it tottered out from behind a pillar. It sauntered up to a massive blast door and touched a fractured security pad with one crooked finger.

The spray of sparks and fragments of its finger heralded the grinding squeal of the red door as it withdrew. The sound, so fierce as to overshadow even the bursts of armed grenades, forced silence on all parties.

In the blackness that filled the new chamber, the single green aura floated thirteen feet above the concrete floor. Each of its breaths was deep and powerful. For a single second, Eli thought he could hear the creature’s pounding heartbeat.

It produced a single trumpeting bellow and then the corridor began to shake. The impact tremors were rhythmic and foreboding.

Deep green and painted with scorches, the chitin hull was rounded and segmented. A lone eye, inset deeply within its head, scanned the surroundings casually. Its jagged teeth seemed to gnaw at the air.

Without further hesitation, the machines opened fire. Contact grenades spiraled into the monster and popped harmlessly off. With a growl that made even the roof tremble, the beast turned and lifted its right hoof.

The crack was like thunder. Glass shattered from the light fixtures. Concrete dust billowed around the beast and bits of rock tapped across the floor.

The pulse was a blaze of red energy. Three of the machines were shattered backward instantly. Their remains flashed into a wall of flames that consumed the other robots and pitched them to the concrete floor. Tumbling helplessly, two additional machines ruptured into clouds of fire and debris.

“MOVE!”

“GO!”

Doctor Vance was enthralled by the battle. Even as his colleagues fled into the smoldering passage, he sat in awe. Only when a security guard pulled at his shoulder did the scientist follow.

He never expected to see the surviving aliens skittering behind him, defending his escape. Neither could he anticipate the loyalty of the gargantuan beast as it too fought to defend Lambda’s refugees.

It would be days before he fully understood the significance of the fall of the Lambda Bunker.

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